

Biesta, G.J.J., Lawy, R.S. & Kelly, N. (2009). Understanding young people's citizenship learning in everyday life: The role of contexts, relationships and dispositions. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 4(1), 5-24.

## Understanding Young People's Citizenship Learning in Everyday Life: The Role of Contexts, Relationships and Dispositions

Gert Biesta,<sup>1</sup> Robert Lawy<sup>2</sup> & Narcie Kelly<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *University of Stirling*

<sup>2</sup> *University of Exeter*

### ABSTRACT

In this article we present insights from research which has sought to deepen understanding of the ways in which young people (13-21) learn democratic citizenship through their participation in a range of different formal and informal practices and communities. Based on the research, we suggest that such understanding should focus on the interplay between contexts for action, relationships within and across contexts, and the dispositions that young people bring to such contexts and relationships. In the first part of the paper we show how and why we have broadened the narrow parameters of the existing citizenship discourse with its focus on political socialisation to encompass a more wide-ranging conception of citizenship learning which is not just focused on school or the curriculum. In the second part of the paper we describe our research and present two exemplar case studies of young people who formed part of the project. In the third part we present our insights about the nature and character of citizenship learning that we have been able to draw from our research. In the concluding section we highlight those dimensions of citizenship learning that would have remained invisible had we focused exclusively on schools and the curriculum. In this way we demonstrate the potential of the approach to understanding citizenship learning that we have adopted.

**KEYWORDS** *citizenship, young people, learning, democracy*

### Introduction

The question of young people's status as democratic citizens has become the focus of attention of policy makers, politicians and researchers in many countries around the world (see, e.g., Giroux, 1989; Englund, 1994; Apple & Beane, 1995; Carr & Hartnett, 1996; Torres 1998; Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001; Ratisch & Viteritti, 2001; Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Biesta, 2007). Recent discussions have been fuelled by concerns about low levels of political participation and engagement and by worries about the erosion of the moral and social fabric of society (see, e.g., McLaughlin, 2000; Pattie *et al.*, 2004). Such concerns have not only been expressed by politicians and policy makers, but also by civil society organisation, parents and teachers, and 'the public' more generally. Although there are concerns about society as a whole, young people have become a principal target of strategies aimed at countering the perceived trend of political and social alienation. Citizenship education is the cornerstone of these initiatives. Over the past decades it has been introduced in a large number of European countries, either as a separate subject or as part of larger curriculum reforms (see Naval *et al.*, 2002; Eurydice, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> England was an 'early adopter.' Here, citizenship education was incorporated into the National Curriculum in 1988 as one of five cross-curricular themes. In September 2002 it became a statutory National Curriculum subject for all students at Key Stages 3 and 4 (age 11-16). This was supplemented

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It is interesting to note that the policy response has focused predominantly on young people and not on the population at large. As Smith *et al.* have suggested, this could well be 'because it is harder to direct such policies at older people, whereas young people can be targeted in schools and might be more receptive to citizenship initiatives' (Smith *et al.*, 2005: 426). More than 50 years ago T.H. Marshall referred to children and young people as 'citizens in the making' (Marshall, 1950: 25). The idea that young people are *not yet* citizens, and the deficit model of citizenship education which underlies it, has continued to play an important role in educational policy and practice (see, e.g., Osler & Starkey, 2003; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Lawy & Biesta, 2006). While we do not wish to downplay the significance of citizenship education – not least because young people themselves have indicated a lack of knowledge and understanding in this area (see White, Bruce & Ritchie, 2000) – we do believe that the inclusion of citizenship in the formal curriculum has served to mask deeper problems concerning young people's citizenship and their learning (see also Gilborn, 2006; Faulks, 2006). Our main concern is with the idea that an alleged crisis in democratic society can be adequately addressed by (re)educating young people so as to make them ready for their roles as democratic, participating and active citizens (see also Biesta, 2006). We see three problems with this line of thinking.

The first problem with this approach is that it is largely aimed at *individual* young people. The assumption is that young people as individuals lack the proper knowledge and skills, the right values, and the appropriate dispositions – the so-called 'citizenship dimensions' (see Kerr, 2005) – to be 'good' and contributing citizens. This line of thinking individualises the *problem* of young people's citizenship. In doing so it is consistent with conservative and neo-liberal ways of thinking in which individuals themselves are blamed for their social malfunctioning and are made responsible for working out a solution.<sup>2</sup> It also individualises democratic citizenship *itself* through the suggestion that a democratic society will simply follow once all citizens have acquired the 'right' set of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions. While school-based citizenship education may be an important and perhaps even necessary factor in the realisation of good citizenship, it can never on its own be a sufficient condition.

The second problem with the idea of citizenship education is that it is based on the assumption of citizenship as the *outcome* of an educational and developmental trajectory. Rather than addressing questions about the constitutive characteristics of

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by non-statutory guidelines for citizenship education alongside Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) at Key Stages 1 and 2 (age 5-11) (see QCA, 2000a; 2000b; 2000c). In France 'éducation civique, juridique et sociale' (civic, juridical and social education) was introduced in the curriculum of the 'lycées' (age 15-19 years of age) in 2001, while 'éducation civique' (civic education) was introduced in the curriculum of the 'collèges' (age 11-14). In the Netherlands the requirement for schools to provide citizenship education was only introduced in 2006. It was left to the schools to decide about the actual shape and form of the provision (see Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> In Biesta & Lawy 2006 we have given a reconstruction of the history of citizenship in Britain after the Second World War, showing how conceptions of citizenship and citizenship education are closely related to differing political ideologies.

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good citizenship, the idea of *citizenship-as-outcome* reveals a strong instrumental or means-end orientation. As Hall *et al.* have argued, 'contemporary political and policy discussion is for the most part much less concerned to critically interrogate the concept of active citizenship, than it is to debate how such a thing might be achieved' (Hall *et al.*, 2000: 464). The idea of citizenship-as-outcome is problematic because it is fabricated on the assumption that citizenship is a status that is only achieved *after* one has successfully traversed a specified trajectory. It thus sees citizenship very much as an 'adult experience' with young people in the position of being not-yet-citizens, in a 'transitional stage between "childhood" and "adulthood"' (France, 1998: 99). This idea of citizenship is *exclusive* rather than *inclusive* since it fails to recognise that young people always already participate in social life and that their lives are always already implicated in the wider social, economic, cultural and political order (see Smith *et al.*, 2005; Faulks, 2006).

This raises the question of learning. An obvious problem with any educational strategy is that there is no guarantee that what is taught will be identical to what is learned. Proponents of the idea of 'effective schooling' may want us to believe that it is only a matter of time before research provides us with teaching strategies that will guarantee success. Yet apart from the question as to what counts as 'success' and who has the right to define it, they seem to forget that learners have to make sense of the curriculum and the activities they are engaged in, and that they do so on the basis of a wide and divergent range of experiences (see Lawy, Bloomer & Biesta, 2004; Dewey, 1938). Education is a process of communication, which is predicated upon the active acts of meaning-making of learners and it is this unpredictable factor which makes education possible in the first place (Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2001; 2006). Young people learn at least as much about democracy and citizenship – including their own citizenship – through their participation in the range of different practices that make up their lives, as they learn from that which is officially prescribed and formally taught. Whilst it is laudable to see schools encouraging internal democratic processes through such mechanisms as school councils that encourage young people to participate meaningfully in the collective decision making, this still only represents a small part of the whole environment in and from which young people learn and through which they form their civic dispositions and identities.

It is for these reasons that we believe, and have argued elsewhere in more detail (Biesta & Lawy 2006), that the teaching of citizenship needs to be supplemented with a more thoroughgoing understanding of the ways in which young people actually learn democratic citizenship through their participation in the communities and practices that make up their everyday lives. A focus on young people's citizenship learning in everyday life settings allows for an understanding of the ways in which citizenship learning is situated in the unfolding lives of young people and helps to make clear how these lives are themselves implicated in the wider social, cultural, political and economic order. It is, after all, ultimately this wider context that provides the opportunities for young people to *be* democratic citizens and to learn from their actual 'condition of citizenship' (Biesta, 2005; see also Faulks, 2006: 137).

In this paper we present insights from a small-scale ethnographic study into the ways in which young people learn democratic citizenship through their participation – or for that matter: non-participation (see below) – in the range of practices and

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communities that make up their lives. The main objective of our research has been to deepen understanding of the ways in which young people's participation in the communities and practices that make up their everyday lives impacts upon their citizenship learning. We have sought to understand the learning opportunities afforded by the different settings and communities that make up young people's lives, such as their family, their peers, leisure activities, paid and unpaid work, media and also, but not primarily or exclusively, formal education and training. We also wanted to gain an understanding of how such learning evolves over time, primarily in relation to when young people become part of different communities and engage in different activities and practices. We were particularly interested in (1) the understandings that young people have of themselves as citizens; (2) the extent to which they feel able to contribute and have a say; (3) what this teaches them about the value and relevance of democratic procedures and practices; and (4) how this, in turn, shapes their attitudes and dispositions towards democratic procedures and practices, both positively and negatively. This is what we understand by citizenship learning.

Our approach takes inspiration from John Dewey (see Dewey, 1966; 1954), for whom democracy is not confined to the sphere of political decision making but extends to participation in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social and political life (see Dewey, 1954; see also Bernstein, 2000: xxi). For Dewey democracy is not merely a form of government but 'a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey, 1966: 87). Thus, democracy is not simply about majority rule but about inclusive ways of social and political action (see Säfström & Biesta, 2001; Biesta, 2006). It is about experiences of belonging and 'having a stake' in social life; it is about the opportunities to shape the conditions that in turn shape opportunities for action (Festenstein, 1997: 70). Dewey refers to the qualities that are at stake in such processes as social intelligence. He argues that social intelligence is both a requirement and outcome of participation in intelligent co-operation. As Carr and Hartnett (1996: 59) explain: 'By participating in this process, individuals develop those intellectual dispositions which allow them to reconstruct themselves and their social institutions in ways which are conducive to the realization of their freedom and the reshaping of their society.' For Dewey such learning processes are the essence of democracy because in a democracy 'all those who are affected by social institutions (...) have a share in producing and managing them.' (Dewey, 1987: 218) Dewey's understanding of democracy highlights the importance of everyday processes, practices and experiences in citizenship learning. It highlights, in other words, the importance of the experience of *being* a citizen for young people's citizenship learning. Thus Dewey has allowed us to recognise the importance of the actual condition of young people's citizenship for their citizenship learning.

Our focus in this paper is on a particular aspect of the dynamics of young people's citizenship learning, viz., on the role of contexts, relationships and dispositions in such learning processes. As we demonstrate in more detail below, young people's citizenship learning is not just a cognitive function; it rather is a process that is *situated*, that is *relational* and that is uniquely linked to young people's individual *life-trajectories*. Understanding the role of contexts, relationships and dispositions in young people's citizenship learning not only contributes to a better understanding of such learning processes both outside and inside the context of formal educational settings; it also suggests a different set of implications for policy and practice. In the

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next section we provide background information about our research which was conducted in the South West of England over a period of four years (Phase 1: 2003-2005; Phase 2: 2005-2007). We then present two exemplar case studies of Matt and Kelly, two of the young people who took part in the project. The stories of Matt and Kelly provide a rich set of insights into the communities and practices that make up their lives, into their positive and negative experiences of taking part and having a say and, more generally, into their condition of citizenship, i.e., the ways in which they can or cannot *be* citizens. In this respect their accounts are not dissimilar to the stories of many other of the young people that we interviewed. We use their stories to illustrate the approach to understanding citizenship learning in everyday life that emerged from our analysis of the data. This approach, as we will argue, highlights the importance of the interplay between contexts, relationships and individual dispositions. The reason why we focus in detail on two cases out of a much larger data set is because we wish to highlight both the *pervasive* and *elusive* nature of citizenship learning in everyday life. On the one hand it can be argued that citizenship learning pervades all aspects of young people's lives because, in principle, any aspect of their lives can be relevant for their growth as democratic citizens. On the other hand, however, there are very few experiences and events in young people's lives that are 'labelled' as opportunities for citizenship learning. In this respect citizenship learning in everyday life is elusive, both for the young people themselves and for researchers trying to make sense of these processes. By focusing on the stories of Matt and Kelly we aim to show that attention to contexts, relationships and dispositions can help us to better understand the dynamics of young people's citizenship learning in everyday life.

### **Citizenship Learning in Everyday Life: The Experiences of Young People<sup>3</sup>**

The first phase of our research into young people's citizenship learning in everyday life was conducted between 2003 and 2005 in the South West of England. Twenty-nine young people, ranging in age from thirteen to age twenty at the outset of the research took part in the study. Each agreed to be interviewed at least twice, with a period of approximately six to nine months between the interviews. Twenty-five of the original cohort were re-interviewed a second time. One participant chose to withdraw from the study and three others moved home and could not be located. Although a number of the interviewees (particularly the younger ones in secondary school) were encouraged to participate by their teachers, they were all volunteers. Eight of the participants were drawn from city based urban contexts; the rest lived in rural towns and villages. Twenty-four of the participants were in some form of education and five were in a training/education/work base setting at the outset of the research. In the second phase of the project (2005-2007) we re-interviewed 8 young people of the original group and conducted further individual and group interviews with 30 young people. In this paper we confine ourselves to the first phase of the research.

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<sup>3</sup> The first phase of the project was supported by a grant from the University of Exeter. The second phase was supported by a grant from the British Academy.

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cohort 1: age at first interview	Male	Female	Totals
13-15	4	7	11
16-17	5	7	12
18+	3	3	6
Totals	12	17	29

We approached young people through a variety of different channels – through school, college and work and also through targeted groups and organisations. These varied from groups involved in sports and other leisure related activities (such as dance clubs, pantomime, model making, choirs, singing groups, bell ringing), to those involved in political and/or environmental activities (such as Fair Trade, recycling, Youth Parliament, Woodcraft). Many of these groups were located outside of educational settings.

The participants were encouraged to talk about their lives and to share their experiences and opinions with the interviewer. Although there were a number of issues that needed to be raised – related to their backgrounds, interests and hobbies and experiences of formal and informal and incidental learning – the interviews were designed to encourage the young people to express their own interests and concerns. Probing questions encouraged the young people to explore their understandings. Direct questions were used when seeking factual information or if necessary to steer the interviewees away from territory that went beyond the broad remit of the research. In all cases, participants were asked to compare difference of experience, and what these differences meant to them, if anything. They were also asked to comment-upon and explore the various influences and learning experiences in their lives. Interviews were generally completed within one hour and one and quarter hours. Second interviews followed a similar pattern to the first interviews where the emphasis was upon gathering information, with further probing to check out themes and ideas, anomalies and contradictions that had been identified from first interviews. Notwithstanding this, the young people were encouraged to address any new issues or interests that were of concern to them. Crucial here were the changes in understanding that had taken place.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analysis of data was undertaken at different levels. Each first interview was analysed as a case study, as well as coded for key themes. Through this process further questions and themes for second interviews were identified for follow up and exploration. The analysis of individual case studies has provided insights into individual experience and transformation, whereas themed analysis has identified more general issues that have been utilised to support our emerging understanding. Through the presentation and discussion of two case studies – the stories of Matt and Kelly – we present findings from our theme analysis which highlights a particular aspect of the dynamics of young people's citizenship learning, viz., the role of contexts, relationships and dispositions in such learning processes

#### **Matt<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

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Matt was interviewed initially when he was aged 15 in Year 11 in his secondary school and was re-interviewed after having moved to the local further education college where he was studying for 2 A-levels in Biology and Psychology.<sup>5</sup> Matt and his family reside in a small town in the South-West of England. As he said:

My family is basically my life so ... if I make a choice of doing something I would think about the consequences, like in my family and things like that. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

When asked to describe other things that were important to him Matt underlined the importance of his hobbies and interests, which were integral to his family relationships and identity:

I'm into extreme sports, surfing, mountain boarding ... it's like skateboard with tyres ... I'm actually in a team for the mountain boarding. I've been doing it for about a year now. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Matt explained that he also enjoyed playing squash with his brother:

I see it as sort of like bonding time. ... It's completely different to having a conversation. It's, I can't explain it, it's playing a game but you're just there on your own and it's really nice. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

He also valued the time spent with his father, skateboarding, mountain boarding and surfing or just 'chuck[ing] a rugby ball around'. As he said:

It's nice it feels like they're there for you 'cos if you've got someone that you can rely on ... If I've got something on my mind I can tell my mum or my brother. If I want different kinds of advice I can ask my mum or dad or my brother. It depends what it is. ... I have, like more of ... a laugh sort of relationship with my dad. We enjoy the same comedy and humour and enjoy the same jokes and I never really argue with dad. ... I can be serious with my mum and ... like talk to her about what I think or something, but with my dad it would probably turn into a joke! (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

These familial relationships were typically mediated through activities such as sport with his brother and father. In all cases it was the *relationships* and the *respect* and *trust* that they implied that were important to him:

My brother ... had a girlfriend for about 10 months and he finished with her and he always tells me what he's feeling and sometimes – there's a park near us – we go and kick a ball around and we sit

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<sup>5</sup> In the English education system Year 11 is the final year of compulsory schooling (which goes up to the age of 16). Students normally take GCSE exams (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at the end of Year 11. After their compulsory schooling students can do 'A-levels' (Advanced Level General Certificate of Education). This takes another two years and this phase of secondary schooling is commonly referred to as the 'sixth form.' A sixth form can be part of a Further Education college.

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down and he'll like tell me how he's feeling or something and he'll say 'I feel much better now,' and that's really good with my brother. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

His relationship with his mother was different:

We'll just like get into a good conversation about something like maybe something that comes up on TV and she'll tell me about her experiences and things and we'll just have a discussion about that. ... She listens quite a lot and she likes to hear my opinion and what I think. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Matt did not perceive school as a place that necessarily encouraged the same types of discourse and relationships. In fact, he felt to a degree cheated at school.

They [teachers] say they're not allowed to say their own opinion because it would sway our opinion. We may think that's the way we should think because it's a teacher and they're teaching us, but when teachers do tell you their opinion it makes it a lot easier to understand them and the way they think. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

By the time of his second interview Matt had entered the 6<sup>th</sup> form (aged 16-17). He was conscious of some significant changes in the attitudes of his teachers.

They [teachers] treat you more like an adult and they're more like a mate instead of telling you what to do, and they just give you a lot more responsibility which makes you feel a lot older. (2<sup>nd</sup> Interview)

Nonetheless Matt was not always able to see the point of what he believed were some petty and often bureaucratic rules in school. Yet, outside school, he could see the purpose of the rules, concerning such issues as health and safety, which were associated with his sport-related interests. As he said:

Yeah, the thing with things like a rule in school ... it's just like a rule that you don't really want to follow... It affects you more like in surfing or something and then you actually benefit from it. (2<sup>nd</sup> Interview)

Outside of school Matt had developed a penchant for the extreme sport of mountain boarding and had recently competed in the National Championships. Matt explained that he was involved in all aspects of the Mountain Boarding club including the development of the course itself: '[T]hat's kind of my creation in a way' and it feels good 'to think that adults are hearing my opinion'.

The bloke, the man who runs the Mountain Board Centre, Stuart, he's from New Zealand. ... (W)e all got together and suddenly started going every week and did some training and just basically built better courses ... there's about twelve of us. We've got a lady



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in the team and two young boys who are about eight. And we meet every week in the winter now and then we'll meet and it's basically social as well. ...It's a nice thing to meet up and we all get on really well. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

The Mountain Board Centre was an important and integral part of Matt's world, through which he was able to locate and connect different dimensions of his life within an interlocking framework. There was his mother's support on the village (parish) council in the discussions about the centre's activities. There was also his involvement as an instructor in the centre which arose directly from his commitment to the sport. Matt received a small payment for teaching but this did not constitute his main motivation. As he said in his second interview, 'sometimes they [new people] come along and they think, "oh I'll never go" and then it's good because you can make them enjoy it and it's a great satisfaction ...'.

The point for Matt was that he was able to express his opinions in this forum in a way that would have been unheard of in school where 'you just can't say what you think'. What he valued in particular were the more equal and democratic relationships that he was already predisposed to through his family.

[I]t's teaching the way of life again and it's nice to see that someone has [respect for you]. It shows a way of them caring about you and thinking they're listening to you so they must care and want to know instead of just going off the subject and thinking 'they know nothing'. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Matt found it difficult to engage fully with issues that he could not easily identify with and which fell outside of the ambit of his experience. Reflecting upon this he said:

[L]ike on red nose day when they show all that stuff it does like sort of hit you for a minute. But I don't know ... If I was involved in it definitely – it makes me sound insensitive but – yeah literally in front of me then as you say like, I'm involved in it. ... If I was there, those kids that aren't eating and things, that would affect me but I'm just seeing it on the telly. It's not, you're not a hundred percent. I feel you don't know if it's a hundred percent real. Yeah, an image rather than something [certain and real]. (2<sup>nd</sup> Interview)

We have indicated that Matt's 'democratic' family relationships comprised an important and crucial factor in his learning. Furthermore, the understandings that he garnered were consolidated by his democratic experiences in learning in other (sporting and leisure-related) dimensions of his life. Indeed, he transported what he learned from these relationships to his relationships outside of the family. As he said:

It always plays on my mind. I think about the consequences, like things that would happen maybe within my friends and people that I don't know well. It just plays on my mind and I think about it. (1<sup>st</sup> Interview)

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More generally Matt came through as a young person who was very aware of his own learning and of the opportunities for learning that still lay ahead.

I'm still young and still learning life. ... I'm still really a kid, I'm only a fraction into my life ... good, still knowing that I've got that ahead of me. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

### **Kelly**

Kelly did not have the same kind of open relationship with her parents or extended family as did Matt. Her father had died when she was very young and her mother had re-married. This had not worked out and after a short period she had divorced. Kelly's mother was now married for the third time. Many of her discussions with her mother and current stepfather tended to revolve around day-to-day issues.

We don't really talk much at home. My step-dad is like on the computer. My Mum is cleaning up the house and I'm just watching telly. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Although Kelly claimed to have a good relationship with her stepfather, she blamed him for taking his mother away from her and her brother Tom (aged 19).

Yeah, I liked it when it was just me and my Mum and brother because I had Mum all to myself. (1<sup>st</sup> interview )

Although Kelly did not have a close personal relationship with Tom she was clearly concerned for his welfare, particularly since he had served in Iraq with the army: '[I] was upset because I thought he was going to die.' Despite her worries for her brother, she was unable and perhaps even unwilling to connect her brother's situation in Iraq with broader political and moral connotations: 'Locally things that happen here [are important] ... Yeah [I'm] stuck in my own little world.'

Outside of the family Kelly was an active member of the majorettes (a marching group), and was involved in her local youth club. It was these leisure-related activities and interests that provided a space where she could stand for herself and work co-operatively with others. When asked about her role in the youth club and her reasons for joining she said:

Well it's like ... I was talking to my friends and she [the youth-worker] was like 'Oh we need some people to start a youth club ... up again and do stuff'. So, like she asked us ... to do it and we said 'Yeah'. So it's like every Wednesday night and ... she gave us loads of cameras when the fair was down, to take pictures and everything of like people on rides ... And we done like a collage. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Kelly chose to leave school at her earliest opportunity (aged 16) when offered the opportunity to work full-time (having previously worked there on a part-time basis)

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alongside her mother, as a trainee, in a hairdressing salon. Kelly explained that she had not enjoyed her time at school.

I just think some things are really pathetic here [school]. ... Jewellery, apparently you can catch your nose stud on a door or something, walk into a door and catch it on something and like ... stuff like that. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

She provided some indication of the sort of frustrations that she felt and of her anger and resentment at not feeling able to express herself in her school environment where linguistic competence was highly valued. Her response was to resort to bravado:

Everyone's scared of me [in school]. ... I'm hard. ... [T]his kid comes up to me and goes: 'Oh you're going to beat up my mate', and I went: 'Am I?' And she goes: 'Yeah, she's crying', and I went over to her and went: 'Mate I ain't gonna beat you up...', like that. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Yeah, everyone's scared of me [in school]. I don't know why. .... I know because I have like younger friends and they come up to me and say, 'Oh she's scared of you because of some reason', and I'm like 'Oh'. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Kelly's world was very much centred upon those events and characteristics that marked her day-to-day life. She did not reflect or theorise-upon her actions. For the most part her experiences comprised an agglomeration of actions and practices that were largely uncoordinated and did not seem to carry any strong sense of perspective or change. Her career was not planned in any way but was simply a continuing outcome that was sometimes serendipitous in its effects. Kelly's work, for example, in the hairdressing salon was not something that had been consciously planned, rather it represented an opportunity for her to work and earn money in an environment that was familiar. The fact that her contribution was valued was an unintended outcome or side-effect, albeit an important one. As she said:

[The staff treat me] as friends really. It's like you're out with your mates. It's like that. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Working in the hairdressing salon she could simply get on with the job in hand, concentrate upon her world, and was not faced with having to make decisions about things that she was not confident about. Initially, as a part-timer she would simply do as she was asked:

Like if my boss just says 'Oh the windows need cleaning because we've got these little glass bits on the window', I always just do them. I just clean really. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

By the time of her 2<sup>nd</sup> interview she was doing much more and was beginning to realise that the work necessitated managing some awkward customers.

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They're too fussy and I'm only washing their hair, and they put their head forward so you can wash that bit there. And then you get them soaking and then they complain, and it's like 'well don't put your head forward then'. But I can't say that. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)

Her discovery that she was both influencing and being influenced by the world around her represented a crucial turning point for Kelly. For the first time, she was able to acknowledge both the impact of her relationships with others, and their effects upon her learning opportunities. This represented an expansion of her learning horizon, offering the opportunity for further but yet unfulfilled, democratically constituted learning.

### **Contexts, Relationships and Dispositions**

The stories of Matt and Kelly provide a rich set of insights into the communities and practices that make up their everyday lives, into their experiences of taking part and having a say, and into their condition of citizenship more generally. They show that their everyday citizenship is not one-dimensional but consists of a wide range of different experiences which not only provide different opportunities for acting and being but, in relation to this, also provide a range of opportunities for citizenship learning. They also show that opportunities for citizenship learning pervade all aspects of life yet, at the same time they indicate that it is difficult to pin down the moment of citizenship learning. In this respect the stories show that citizenship learning is both pervasive and elusive. In these respects the stories of Matt and Kelly are not dissimilar to the accounts of many other young people we interviewed. For the purpose of this chapter we wish to focus on one particular aspect of young people's citizenship learning which highlights the importance of (the interplay between) contexts, relationships and dispositions.

The first thing we found through our analysis is a confirmation of the fact that *contexts do matter*. Different contexts provide different opportunities for acting and being, and thus different opportunities for citizenship learning. In Matt's case, for example, there were clear differences between his experiences in the family and leisure context on the one hand, and school on the other. He was fortunate in that his family experiences were to a large degree organised on inclusive (democratic) principles. His views were valued and he was afforded a space in which to be active and to contribute. Kelly's experiences of early learning within the family were altogether different. While her family relationships were important to her, they did not afford her the same opportunities for being and learning. This became more evident in her 2<sup>nd</sup> interview as she described her role in those activities that she undertook outside of the family and school, but this was still largely perfunctory. It is not that Kelly's experiences were in any way less authentic than those of Matt, rather that the different contexts or settings that she was exposed to did not frame her early dispositions in the same way as those of Matt; they provided opportunities for acting and for her to exercise her agency at a different point in her life. This does not mean, of course, that Kelly did not learn from her family experiences or from her schooling, rather that her learning experiences were largely structured and organised in a non-democratic way. Matt also had to contend with non-democratic experiences. What he was able to do at an earlier time in his life than Kelly, was to take these non-

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democratic experiences, such as rule-following in school, and locate them alongside his more democratic experiences.

While we recognise that the opportunities for being, acting and learning afforded by different contexts are partly the result of the ways in which young people experience and give meaning to them, we found it useful to develop a basic typology of contexts for citizenship learning. We characterised the range of contexts as falling into one of four broad groupings: unavoidable, compulsory, voluntary and ambiguous contexts. The first of these includes those situations that are quite simply *unavoidable*. The family is case-in-point insofar as all individuals need to be nurtured in some way either through the family or a surrogate in their early years in order to survive. The second group comprises *compulsory* contexts, such as schooling, where there is a formal or legal requirement of attendance. The third group comprises *voluntary* contexts (often leisure-related or peer related) where young people have a degree of choice in respect of their commitment and participation. We labelled the final grouping *ambiguous*. This includes all the situations where there are elements of more than one of the groupings that we have described. For example, we found that work was ambiguous for many of the young people in our research. For those in school and college, the work they were involved in (part-time jobs) was not compulsory, whereas for others – and this applied to some of the young people who worked to supplement their family finances whilst in school or college – it was a matter of necessity if not compulsion to work. For some young people, what began as a way to earn some extra pocket-money (for example Kelly), became almost compulsory when their preferred life-style became increasingly dependent on their extra income. Another ambiguous context related to the impact of the media which seemed to vary from person to person (it was labelled ambiguous for this reason) and was dependent in large measure to both the external conditions, and the dispositions of the young people. Other settings which could also be labelled as ambiguous included college/university education. Although officially non-compulsory, for many young people it had a compulsory 'feel' given the social pressures and the desire of young people to gain higher qualifications in order to increase their job prospects. Affiliations to religious groups were another example of ambiguous contexts, contexts that could be or become more compulsory or even unavoidable in the lives of young people.

Although this typology only gives an indication of significant differences between contexts, it is a helpful lens to understand the dynamics of citizenship learning in that it helps to understand the different ways in which opportunities for acting, being and learning are related to contextual characteristics. In compulsory contexts such as the school there are limited opportunities for having a say and influencing the conditions of schooling, which partly explains why the experiences with school as an institution are largely negative for both Matt and Kelly. Unavoidable contexts lack the extent of choice available in voluntary contexts, but this does not mean that there are no opportunities for acting and shaping the situation. It is clear, however, that in the context of the family these opportunities turned out to be significantly different for Matt and Kelly. Voluntary contexts allow for a different kind of engagement. Although such context may vary in the extent to which young people can have a say and influence the situation, the very fact that they engage in such contexts on a voluntary basis makes their engagement of a different quality than in the case of unavoidable and compulsory contexts. Ambiguous contexts carry elements of the

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other three contexts. Much depends here on the particular balance between unavoidable, compulsory and voluntary elements.

Although contexts are important for citizenship learning in everyday life, our second main finding is that the impact of different contexts is crucially mediated by the *relationships* within contexts; furthermore, that broader relational aspects concerning the organisation and structuring of young people's experiences across contextual boundaries, are significant. This claim presumes that the understandings of young people are a function of context, and yet at the same time conditional upon their prior experiences and understandings. Matt's experiences of school, for example, were not entirely positive, nonetheless he was able to distinguish between the institutional and the personal and individual relationships with teachers and pupils that he regarded in a more positive light. He certainly did not see school as encouraging democratic relationships and participation where he was required to follow rules without any explanation. But as he notes in his first interview, he was also conscious that his teachers were not immune from this external control. Matt's experiences of school were counterbalanced by his experiences elsewhere in the relationships that he fabricated in his sporting activities at the Mountain Boarding Club and in his family. These relationships were founded upon trust and a set of shared values and commitments. Kelly's experiences of school as a fundamentally non-democratic institution mirrored the experiences of Matt. Her world was very much centred upon those events and characteristics that marked her day-to-day life. She did not reflect upon or theorise-upon her actions. For the most part her experiences comprised an agglomeration of actions and practices that were largely uncoordinated and did not seem to carry any strong sense of perspective or change. Kelly's career, for example, was not planned in any way but simply represented an opportunity for her to continue to earn money, alongside her mother. The fact that her contribution in the hairdressing salon was valued was an unintended outcome or side-effect, albeit an important one.

Our third finding is that opportunities to young people for citizenship learning are not only dependent on contexts and relationships but are also conditional upon their individual *dispositions* – the different ways in which they approach situations and relationships. The critical question is not so much that young people act in these different ways rather it is to identify those factors and influences, together with their relational characteristics, that impinge upon their dispositions. By the time that Matt entered the 6<sup>th</sup> form (Year 12) of his school it was clear that he had become a reflective learner who was able to think through the consequences of his actions and the actions of others. Kelly's disposition and attitude was more hedonistic and very much grounded in the here and now. While her life was at least as eventful as Matt's, she had yet to reflect or theorise upon her actions, and this clearly had an impact on the quality of her learning. These differences, and the opportunities for being and acting that are contingent upon them, are not merely the outcome of personal characteristics but also depend on earlier learning experiences and the relations between them. This indicates that young people's citizenship learning is intimately connected to young people's individual life-trajectories – an issue we have explored in more detail elsewhere (see Lawy & Biesta, 2007).

To understand young people's citizenship learning in everyday life in terms of the interplay between contexts, relationships and dispositions is, of course, not all there is

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to say about these learning processes. We do wish to contend, however, that using this 'lens' is a helpful way to capture both the pervasive and elusive nature of such learning processes and, in this way, cannot only help us to better understand the complexities of citizenship learning in everyday life, but also provides avenues for the support and improvement of these learning processes. For policy makers one of the most important messages from the approach outlined in this paper is that any attempt to improve young people's citizenship should start with the improvement of the democratic quality of the communities and practices that make up people's lives. It is, after all, the quality of the actual condition of young people's citizenship – i.e., the opportunities for participation and engagement – that is of crucial importance for democratic action, being and learning. For citizenship education one of the most important implications of our approach has to do with the interaction between citizenship learning inside and outside of the formal citizenship curriculum. It is likely that citizenship education will benefit most in those situations where there is a synergy between the official curriculum and the everyday 'lessons' in citizenship. This, again, points at the importance of the democratic quality of contexts and relationships within and across those contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Reporting on the third year of an eight year longitudinal study into citizenship education in England, Kerr notes the complexity of the processes of citizenship learning.

[Y]oung peoples' development of citizenship dimensions (knowledge, skills, understanding, attitudes and behaviours) is complex and influenced by a range of interrelated factors and influences. These influences include contextual characteristics ... or factors, 'sites' of citizenship education (school, family, peer groups, community) and the various actors (teachers, parents, friends) that take part in the (formal and informal) educational processes at these different 'sites'. (Kerr, 2005: 88)

The analysis of our data supports this view. But unlike what seems to be implied in Kerr's statement, we do not start from an assumption that young people are in any way deficient in terms of their citizenship status. Rather we assume that the lives of young people are not outside of but are part of the social fabric, and that their citizenship learning is a direct result of their articulation with the conditions of citizenship that we have described. This reveals the importance of 'having a say,' 'being taken seriously,' and 'having an influence' whilst also indicating the transformatory potential of these influences upon behaviour and action. All of these factors provide young people with opportunities and experiences that are crucial to the process of citizenship learning. But they differ strongly from context to context, are crucially mediated by relationships, and influenced by the dispositions that young people bring to such situations.

Despite the fact that progress is being made, through the newly introduced curriculum for citizenship education, to make schooling a more democratic experience, our research suggests that many young people continue to regard school as a non-democratic institution suffused with rules and regulations. There is some evidence to

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suggest that this has served to only emphasise the lack of control and 'felt' agency of young people over significant portions of their lives. One of the most significant findings of our research is the special quality of leisure activities, such as sport, in which young people are able to relate with adults in a way that is structurally different from their relationships with parents and caregivers and teachers. It may well be that these contexts are amongst the most significant ones with respect to the process of citizenship learning – a point that warrants further analysis and discussion (see also Biesta *et al.*, 2001). By way of contrast the profound lack of involvement and engagement of young people in 'official politics' where they typically feel marginalised and excluded and where their views and opinions have little or no effect upon national, let alone international issues and policies, came as little surprise to us (see also Faulks, 2006: 136-137). Although Matt and Kelly were aware of the impact of international issues and questions, such as those concerning Iraq, their interests were largely focused upon local and personal questions that had direct bearing upon their day-to-day lives and over which they were able to exert some control.

To date our findings have highlighted dimensions of democratic learning that would have remained invisible had the focus been exclusively on schools and the curriculum. We have shown – through the 'triad' of contexts, relationships and dispositions – that young people learn from the opportunities for action, participation and reflection that are afforded by the practices and communities in their everyday lives. Furthermore, young people learn by way of the experiences they bring into any situation (their prior learning), and from the different relationships and contexts that they find themselves in. We recognise that the approach of this paper is only a first step in exploring the complexities of citizenship learning and that much more is possible. If there is one practical conclusion that we might want to draw from our research so far, it is that a more appropriate and effective response to all the concerns about young people's citizenship and the future of democracy and citizenship learning should lie in a concern for the actual condition of young people's citizenship, rather than in the mere improvement of the curriculum for citizenship teaching.

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### **Correspondence**

Gert Biesta, Institute of Education, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland, UK  
[e-mail@: gert.biesta@stir.ac.uk]